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A Quest for Freedom: Finding my Actor Process

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A Quest for Freedom: Finding my Actor Process

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Dedication

For my mother, who has never stopped believing in me and told me I could be whatever I wanted to be...and truly meant it. For my sister, for loving me unconditionally and teaching me how to be a better person. For Octavio, who saw me as an artist even when I didn't see it myself. And for Wylla, who has quickly taught me that life is about love and family first.

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Abstract

A Quest for Freedom: Finding my Actor Process

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This paper is a reflection on an actor's journey through the Graduate Acting Program at the University of Texas at Austin which culminated in a thesis production of *Intimate Apparel* directed by Melissa Maxwell. This paper examines the tools and techniques acquired in training both in the classroom, production and outside experiences. In addition, this paper will provide an in-depth examination of how the character of Mayme in The University of Texas's production of *Intimate Apparel* was created using said tools and techniques as well as new skills acquired during the process.

Table of Contents

EMBARKING ON A QUEST.....	1
PART ONE: IN THE CLASSROOM.....	2
Chapter 1 Acting	2
Chapter 2 Movement.....	4
Chapter 3 Voice	6
Chapter 4 Devising/Collaboration	8
PART TWO: IN THE CLASSROOM	8
Chapter 1 Finding Community	9
Anna in the Topics	9
Finding a Mentor.....	9
Chapter 2 Guest Artists.....	10
Meryl Streep.....	10
Agents/Casting Directors	11
Actors/Directors/Artistic Directors	11
PART THREE: PRODUCTION/PERFORMANCE	12
Chapter 1 Year One	12
Junie B. Jones.....	12
The Threepenny Opera	12
Chapter 2 Year Two.....	13
The Cherry Orchard	13
Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde	14
Love's Labour's Lost	15
Chapter 3 Year Three.....	15
Ragtime	15

PART FOUR: INTIMATE APPAREL	16
Chapter 1 The Process	18
Before the First Rehearsal.....	18
Music/Piano	19
Movement	20
Dialect/Vocal Work	22
In the Rehearsal Room.....	23
Run of the Show.....	29
Chapter 2 Performance Evaluation	30
Personal Evaluation	30
Outside Feedback	31
COMPLETING A JOURNEY	32
Appendix A Shakespeare Notes.....	34
Appendix B Dramaturgical Questions	38
Appendix C Image Board	39
Appendix D Research Notes	41
Appendix E Reviews.....	43
Appendix F Emails	50
Bibliography	54
Vita	56

EMBARKING ON A QUEST

I would have never guessed that my life path would lead me to Texas. When this amazing opportunity arose I knew I had to take it and run. Because I wasn't in my first show until eighteen and did not study acting until my third year of college, I knew I needed more: more technique, more foundation, more experience. I wanted to feel confident going out into the industry and I wanted craft. My quest for knowledge and confidence brought me to this program.

People warned me how difficult graduate school would be and I scoffed. School had always come incredibly easy to me and I never felt academically or emotionally challenged. I should have listened. The past three years have been the hardest, the most difficult, most challenging years of my life. I questioned myself about who I am more than I ever have. And yet it has been the most wonderful, miraculous and life changing experience of my life. I entered graduate school as a girl who thought she knew something but actually knew nothing and am happily leaving as strong, motivated, more generous, more sensitive, more able and definitely more confident woman.

I have found an identity, I have found confidence, I have found craft, I have found a process and through finding all these things I have discovered a freedom in my acting. My work in the classroom, my experiences outside of the classroom, work with guest directors and production experience which has culminated in my performance as Mayme in my thesis production of *Intimate Apparel* have readily prepared me to enter the industry capable, confident and with a clear path for the future.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Chapter 1: Acting

Stanislavski believed that the actor's job is "...not to present merely the external life of his character. He must fit his own human qualities to the life of this other person, pour into it all of his own soul. The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in artistic form" (Stanislavski). Our acting training at UT is largely based in Stanislavski's system. We focused on learning about objectives (what I want in a scene), actions (what I do to get what I want), and obstacles (what gets in the way of what I want). We combined this with the ideas of "speaking from self" and "emotion memory". We combined our study of Stanislavski with Sanford Meisner who's goal was to "impart to students an organized approach to the creation of real and truthful behavior within the imaginary circumstances of the theatre" (Meisner).

Our Meisner study was focused on living in the moment, talking and listening, really observing your partner, incorporating the 'as-if' and emotional preparation. This study gave me a foundation and a basic actor toolbox to reach into. Because of this training, I now know how to tackle a script, analyze text and character, figure out what I want and need in a scene and know how to get myself there emotionally. I am also walking away with honed listening and observational skills; my ability to be open and available to my partner has grown tremendously. I have become a more generous actor and scene partner and have learned to trust my instincts. Once I had a solid foundation of technique, I was able to explore other styles of acting.

Shakespeare class was the hardest, most challenging class with the most suffering and yet the greatest payoff. I got so many things out of this class, including a great deal of

craft and technique, tougher skin, and a deep love for performing Shakespeare. I use Fran Dorn's techniques and mantras in all the Shakespeare work I do (see Appendix A) and the tough skin I had to build in that class will behoove my acting career for the rest of my life. Without this class, I would never have been ready to work with John Lang's on *Love's Labour's Lost*. It gave me a system and a way to work so that I could then incorporate it into my own process. With a strong technical foundation, I have been able to successfully audition and book two professional Shakespeare productions prior to graduation.

I am also incredibly grateful for the on-camera course. Working with Austin casting director, Sally Allen, has added another dimension to my training. With her, I have been able to explore the differences between camera and stage acting and the adjustments that are needed when bouncing between the two styles. I have also learned a great deal about the industry, being given the skills to navigate agent meetings, what to do in the audition room, how to deal with unions and pay. We also got a great deal of on-camera time, doing mock auditions for commercials, films and television shows. This training has given me more confidence in front of the camera, has allowed me to get used to seeing my face on film, and has given me the knowledge I need to get out there and start. It has also given me an awareness of my need to continue to study these techniques if I hope to work in the film/television industry.

With the acting training I have received, I feel confident in my abilities to enter the professional world and feel I know what I'm doing. What I have built here at UT is craft: a distinct set of tools and techniques and knowledge of theory that allow me to do my better and more truthfully.

Chapter 2: Movement

The movement training in the department has been impressive. I have been able to study Pilates in-depth, mask, mime, clowning, been exposed to Viewpoints and was introduced to Laban, Alexander Technique, Suzuki and basic stage combat. My movement studies have significantly aided my acting and I have tried to incorporate much of what I have learned into my process.

My training in Pilates and Alexander has changed the way I live my daily life. I have awakened and discovered an awareness of my body and how to properly use it. With Pilates and Alexander, I have been given the tools to manage and control my habitual movement patterns such as closing off my heart by rounding my shoulders and not holding myself up by my scapulas. The improvement I had made in my posture is not only beneficial to my health and longevity as an actor, but has helped my stage presence and ability to connect with my scene partner. I have discovered that an open sternum and collarbone and a strong opposition north and south allows me to be much more open and available and ready to engage. I am also very grateful for my in depth study of Pilates because I am now capable of working out on my own using all the skills, exercises and techniques that I have learned.

Both Viewpoints and Laban have been excellent tools, each with a distinct vocabulary, which has allowed me to explore movement in new ways. Laban has been particularly useful in discovering what my habitual movement patterns are. I have learned that I am typically direct, heavy and sudden. Knowing this, I can now work against these habituals to create a character who moves very unlike myself and is ultimately/hopefully transformative. This is an accessible tool to use on characters in performance, allowing me to define even more specifically, who my character is and how they move about in

their world. The Viewpoints have become one of my favorite ways to discover blocking in scenes and a great way to warm up with a willing ensemble. I use the Viewpoints extensively in my teaching to build ensemble and awaken and hone a beginning actor's instincts. The Viewpoints also greatly helped my listening. What I love about the Viewpoints is the hyper-awareness, focus and concentration that is necessary. I found that focusing on spatial relationships and kinesthetic response in rehearsals would allow me to focus on everything but myself and allowed movement and blocking in scenes to happen much more organically. When explaining the Viewpoints in her article, *Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What are They?*, Tina Landau talks about just that: "The information which causes movement doesn't come from a direction as much as a response to what is already happening around them in the playing space" (Landau 25).

We touched on many other movement theories and techniques. Briefly studying Suzuki, gave me a thirst to learn more. I admire the discipline it takes, and still use the technique we learned of rehearsing a monologue in a physically demanding position. This is useful when I am feeling blocked and need to get out of my head. Stage Combat is obviously a great skill to have on my resume and makes me feel much more confident about knowing how to keep myself safe working with others. Mask and mime were also wonderful in discovering how to move my body in different ways. I found mask and mime to be helpful in finding ways to express myself through movement rather than my face, which can be over active at times. As Giovanni Fusetti says in his article *The Poetic Body*, "A mime is, first of all, somebody who can take an impression of the world in his body and then represent it through gestures" (Fusetti 1). Mime was a challenging workout for the imagination and the body, and from it I took a new understanding of specificity that I apply to my work onstage. If I am going to perform an action or activity or make a gesture or move in a certain direction, I must actually do it, with intense

specificity of purpose and do it in real time. Clowning and authentic movement allowed me to let go of judging myself and others. Both helped me to open up my sense of play and fun and not take things so seriously -- a discovery that was wildly necessary in my first year as I have learned that sense of play and ability to have fun is a huge factor in being rehired by a theatre or director.

I am able to continue my movement study, to teach movement and utilize what I have learned in my own character development process. My movement training has been one of the most influential aspects of my development and growth here.

Chapter 3: Voice

My voice work at The University of Texas has consisted of practical voice work, working with text and accent/dialect work. With Barney Hammond, we studied the vocal theory of Patsy Rodenburg and Cicely Barry. I entered this program without any vocal training; I didn't know how to fully use my voice and had no protocol for exercising my voice or warming it up. Similarly, I had never done any accent work and certainly didn't know how to navigate my way around learning one. I am leaving with all of these things in my actor toolbox.

Under Barney Hammond's guidance, I now have a protocol for warming up before shows and rehearsals. I have a plethora of exercises and vocaleses to continue to strengthen my voice and maintain my work. I have also been able to teach an undergraduate non-major class, where I am able pass on what I have learned. Teaching the skills has only reinforced my own work and deepened my understanding of vocal theories. In addition, we had the opportunity to apply our training to difficult texts in class such as Sophocles, Wilde and Shaw which will make future auditions for these playwrights much easier now that we have the specific tools with which to dive into

them. I now know have specific tools and knowledge: owning my character's values, finding the flips in a speech, a swift rate of thinking and speaking, discovery and surprise, how to indentify loaded, shared and springboard words. These tools can help me to find my way through difficult text and are wonderful tools in rehearsal when working on monologues or scenes.

The accent and dialect work with Pamela Christian had such a tangible payoff. Not only am I confident in several accents at the drop of a hat now, but I also have a method and the tools to teach myself a new accent or dialect. I have a binder of all the accents that I have learned, with notes and examples, as well as having the book¹ and access to the website² by Paul Meier, whose method of learning accents is what we used in class.

My vocal training has allowed me to discover my full voice, how to breath properly, improved my breath capacity and range, allowed me to identify tension and know how to release it, how to speak on support, how to work moment to moment, allowed me to find confidence in my voice, taught me how find ownership of words and has given me tangible tools such as a voice protocol and accent binder that I can take with me in the rest of my career. Being able to teach voice has reiterated my training and solidified what I know works for me, as well as giving me the skills to know how to coach actors and non-actors in the future which could be an excellent job opportunity.

Chapter 4: Collaboration/Devising

Anne Bogart says devised theatre, "...is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas,

¹ Accents & Dialects for Stage and Screen by Paul Meier

² International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) at <http://web.ku.edu/idea>

images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli...generated by a group of people working in collaboration” (Bogart). I have taken away a great deal from my devising/collaboration classes. One of the greatest things I have learned is how to create theatre for myself. By being forced to write and create from scratch, I have discovered how to be more than just an actor. I have learned how to be an actor/producer/writer/director and most importantly, how important ensemble and collaboration is to me as an artist. I love working with other artists and am a firm believer that nobody really knows anything, so putting more brains together and using all the brains that are accessible to me will only make my art better and stronger. Using the Viewpoints, Deborah Hays techniques, the Rude Mechanicals school of thought, the theory of Propaganda Theatre and working directly with playwrights who are at the top of their field, I have built a strong foundation in the ensemble and collaborative process and will have many different skills and tools for devising new work.

PART TWO: OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

One of the biggest lessons I have learned during my time here is that you can't wait for people to find opportunities for you, you must make them for yourself. My experiences in my devising and collaboration class also lit a fire under me to pursue working with Latino artists and finding my people. The result of these motivations was a wonderful production experience working on *Anna in the Tropics*, finding a great mentor and friend in Octavio Solis, and networking and learning from many of the guests we have been able to visit with and learn from.

Chapter 1: Finding Community

Anna in the Tropics

Between my second and third year, I went home for the summer and performed with a small company called Teatro Nagual. Stephen Gerald strongly encouraged me to find a performance experience where I would be working with all Latinos. He said I wouldn't ever really know who I was, or my place in the industry until I did. At the time, it made me livid. In retrospect, I understand where he was coming from. At the time, I was struggling with my Latina identity and feeling like I was being viewed and cast very one-dimensionally. I still don't know if I agree with Mr. Gerald, but *Anna in the Tropics* did give me the gift of finding my place within a new community of people who are like me. It also gave me a great deal of confidence in my craft and what I had learned in the past two years. The difference in my professionalism, work ethic, ability to play in the rehearsal room and even having a process greatly differed from my mostly amateur actor cast-mates. Working on this show showed me that I was ready to work in a professional setting outside of the grad school bubble and that I did in fact have a home and a place within the Latino theatre community. My excitement, work ethic and passion paid off and my performance was nominated for Best Supporting Actress in the local regional/community awards, the Ellys. I was thrilled to have performed at home for the first time and be so well received by my own community.

Finding a Mentor

I always joke to people that if I walk away from graduate school with nothing else but my relationship with Octavio it would still be worthwhile. I first heard of Mr. Solis because of his Pulitzer Prize nominated play, *Lydia*. Another friend, whose career I greatly admired, starred in the show at the Mark Taper Forum. She turned me on to him

as a writer and when I discovered that he would be the playwright in residence at the University of Texas I went ballistic. I immediately contacted Steven Dietz and Suzan Zeder, asking for his contact information and telling them I would be very interested in working with Octavio in any fashion possible. Octavio quickly emailed me back, excited to hear from a fellow northern Californian and Latino. Eventually, we set up a staged reading of the new play he was working on and I got to spend one glorious week in the rehearsal room with him working on his newest baby. It was so meaningful to be a part of something Latino, since that opportunity was not afforded to me by this institution. Since then, Octavio and I have maintained a close relationship. Whenever I am feeling downtrodden or need advice I always call him and when I am able to see him in California, I do. It is wonderful to have someone who I know is so completely in my corner and supportive of what I do. He truly believes in me and I found that to be invaluable to my artistry; he inspires me to be a better artist and a better person.

Chapter 2: Guest Artists

Elsewhere in this paper, I sing the praises of directors John Langs and Melissa Maxwell, as well as mentor and playwright-in-residence Octavio Solis. We were fortunate enough to have many other experiences with guests artists that taught me a great deal about the business and the industry as a whole.

Meryl Streep

Meeting Meryl Streep was beyond thrilling and absolutely life-changing. What was momentous about this meeting was how much it solidified my realization that this is the only thing I could possibly do with my life. Meryl was also a beautiful lesson in humility and no matter how big you are, you can never get too big for your britches. One of the things she said that really affected me was that she, the Meryl Streep, never

assumed she would work past her current project. She never assumes she will continue to get parts, which I think as an actor is a smart way to view it. I can never sit on my laurels and expect things to come to me. Continued work and success will only come with great work ethic, being good to work with and then being a good actor.

Agents/Casting Directors

We have had the opportunity to meet several agents and/or casting directors: Fern, Phil Brock, Deborah Duckett and Mari Lyn-Henry. The most valuable thing I learned from these workshops and meetings was how cold and cutthroat the commercial and television industry is, particularly Los Angeles. It takes a tough skin to be around and work with people who are not in it for the art whatsoever. I am glad to make this discovery before I have to dive into it. I feel better prepared for what to expect and more knowledgeable in how the industry ticks.

Actors/Directors/Artistic Directors

We were also able to meet and sometimes audition for an array of theatre people: Ken Washington from The Guthrie, Linda Hartzell from Seattle Childrens Theatre, Klea Scott, Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Schennken, Paul Barnes from Great River Shakespeare. Networking is such an important part of this business and maintaining relationships with people I meet is super important. I am friends with most of these people on Facebook, and try to make a point of sending them an email or a comp card every once in a while. Its also important to do that with other directors I have have worked with like John Langs who is now the AD of Seattle Theatre Company, Melissa Maxwell who works in New York a lot, and Helena Kays who is the AD of the Hypocrites in Chicago.

PART THREE: PRODUCTION/PERFORMANCE

Chapter 1: Year One

Junie B. Jones in Jingle Bells Batman Smells

Junie B. Jones in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells by Allison Gregory, was my first production with the University that was co-produced with the professional Paramount Theatre in downtown Austin and directed by Steven Dietz. Only the second straight play I had ever done, I was incredibly green and inexperienced. I found the process to be challenging because I had yet to be given the tools I needed. My eagerness and love for performing pulled me through, but in retrospect, I could have done so much more. I did feel successful in my movement work with this show. We had been focusing on Laban in movement class, and I used many of these techniques to find the lightness and bubblyness of snobby 6 year old, Lucille. What I remember struggling with was being able to interpret the director's notes and apply them successfully. I would not discover the tools for this until later in my training.

The Threepenny Opera

The Threepenny Opera is still perhaps my favorite show to date. Certainly not my best performance here at the University, but it certainly was one of the most fun. My heart resides in musicals; I love to sing onstage and I loved my role. I am not sure I will ever have a moment onstage quite as thrilling as singing "Mack the Knife" in a sharp spotlight at the top of the show. Again however, I struggled taking notes. My desire to please my incredible director led to extreme frustration when I felt like I didn't know how to give her what she was asking for. I truly believe I just didn't have the craft. It wasn't until working on the *Pain & the Itch* and then with Brant Pope on the *Cherry*

Orchard that I discovered how to be in the rehearsal room and how to take and translate notes.

Chapter 2: Year Two

The Cherry Orchard

The Cherry Orchard was less of a main-stage production and more of a two month workshop on Chekov and how to be a professional actor. Director Brant Pope spent a great deal of time talking about how to be an actor in the rehearsal room and how to not be a student actor. I learned the importance of point of view, character and taking and receiving notes.

In this production, I learned that it is the audience which defines the character; the actor must simply have a point of view. This point of view is specific to that character's background and experience, and the way they view the world and their relationships. Point of view is always unique and specific. How you "see" translates into how you behave and how you treat others. Brant also emphasized the importance of relying on your scene partner and using everything I have to affect the other. Lines are never about me, characters offstage or the past, it is always about my scene partner. Tools that help me do this are playing positive energy, meaning I must expect to win with every line. I can never play the problem because there is never a time when the character is being ineffective from their own point of view. Therefore, in different language but similar to Stanislavsky's objective, you must always know what you are trying to do to the other and how you are trying to change them. I became a better listener who was reacting and present in the living moment. In *Cherry Orchard* for example, the line "I'm so excited I'm shaking. I may faint" may seem awkward but in Dunyasha's eyes she seeks Lopokin's attention and wants him to see her as desirable and that exciting things are

happening to her (Chekov 334). Using Stanislavsky's vocabulary, my action would then be to bait him because I want him to ask me why I am so excited.

Another huge lesson Brant taught me was how to translate director notes to working acting adjustments. Before this production, I struggled to consistently keep and apply notes and many times it was because I didn't know how to give the director what he or she wanted. I didn't know how to successfully and truthfully "be more sad/happy/scared/insert random adjective here." What Brant taught me is that a note usually means you need to either slightly tweak or adjust your point of view, or find a new way to change the other person. Sometimes I learned, getting the "I need more _____" note just means they are asking for more energy. Now, if I get a note of needing more or less of something, I first examine my character's point of view on the situation and see how I can adjust it. If I'm in rehearsal, I try new and different ways to change my scene partner. I have found these skills invaluable.

Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde

Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde was a fun project in which I got to work in complete collaboration with a tight ensemble and incredibly talented artistic team. This show opened up my sense of play and really developed the skill of working in an ensemble. We did a great deal of exploratory movement and improvisation work which required an open heart and team work. We built the show around a lot of devised work, similar to what we had done in collaboration classes. It also built my stamina, as we were all onstage most of the time. I appreciated this role because my character and the tone of the show required stillness and active listening and I couldn't rely on any of the energetic, bubbly tricks I usually relied on. Because of that, it stretched my comfort zone and allowed me to discover another character type I could play.

Love's Labour's Lost

Love's Labour's Lost directed by John Langs, was a difficult process. I was having health problems at the time and on medication for a great deal of the rehearsal process. Being in constant pain made it more difficult to memorize lines, be present in the room and connect with my scene partners. Luckily, everyone was aware of what was going on as I fought my way through the haze. In the process, I learned a lot about Shakespeare and working with a professional director.

Working with John showed me the importance of creating a 3-dimensional living being on stage. He emphasized entering “full” and having a three dimensional character. I spent hours with John Langs studying the text until I knew exactly what I was saying and why. He reiterated what we learned in Shakespeare about building the images and going all the way to the ends of lines and he encouraged each of us to find a specific and unique point of view.

Love's Labour's Lost felt like the perfect way to end our second year. John Langs set the bar incredibly high and expected us to behave and deliver like professional actors. It was a wonderful end to the year that prepared us for the following semester's professional partnership with The Zach Scott Theatre.

Chapter 3: Year Three

Ragtime

Ragtime was a worthwhile experience, beneficial to my training and my professional career. One of the most tangible things I got out of this experience was being eligible to join EMC (Equity Membership Candidate) and getting eleven of the fifty points needed for full membership. In addition, I was able to understudy a lead role and was put on a very difficult track that tested my stamina, pushed my dancing abilities and allowed

me a few moments to showcase my craft as the house maid. I also appreciated working with a professional company, not only for the credit on my resume, but also to experience a show outside of an educational setting. As my training was consistently teaching me, reliability, focus and work ethic proved to be invaluable in a large cast of fifty where rehearsal involved a lot of hurry up and wait. Overall, it gave me an appreciation for what was awaiting me after graduation, reminded me of the importance of professionalism and was a great segue way into *Intimate Apparel*.

PART FOUR: INTIMATE APPAREL

In my thesis production at the University of Texas at Austin, I played Mayme in UT's main-stage production of *Intimate Apparel*. This six person ensemble production, written by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Lynn Nottage,³ opened on Friday, March 1st and closed on Saturday, March 9th. It was performed in the Oscar J. Brockett Theatre; a black-box theatre with a thrust stage. Being a part of *Intimate Apparel* was an incredibly rewarding experience. I have grown and learned so many things as an actor and a professional in this industry and could not have asked for a better way to culminate my time here at UT.

Intimate Apparel is set in New York City in 1905. It is the story of Esther, an African-American woman who has recently turned thirty-five. Living alone in a boarding house run by Mrs. Dickson, Esther sews intimate apparel for various ladies. Her clients range from 5th Avenue white ladies like Mrs. Van Buren to a prostitute in the tenderloin named Mayme who she counts as a friend. Esther, feeling her age and longing for

³ Nottage won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Ruined* in 2009 (<http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2009-Drama>).

intimacy, begins exchanging letters with a man named George, who is working on the Panama Canal. Being illiterate, she relies on the women in her life to read and write her love letters to George. All the while, she continues to buy fabric from the Romanian Orthodox Jew, Mr. Marks, with whom she shares a strong but socially objectionable connection. A 1905 catfish⁴ story, *Intimate Apparel* follows what happens when reality doesn't match the dream we have conjured in our imagination.

As an artistic team, the story we decided to tell was one of missed intimacy. Our goal was to show how these characters, each in their own way, reach, strive and yearn for true intimacy. They risk everything, but are never able to achieve or attain it. Mayme works in an industry that consists entirely of false intimacy. She has learned to separate herself from intimacy and vows to “never feel nothing for those fools” (Nottage). She takes a gigantic risk in falling for her “Songbird,” George. This makes the discovery of who George really is and then losing him that much more tragic and horrifying. In an interview, Lynn Nottage called *Intimate Apparel* a commentary on loneliness and I think we were successful in conveying that. I am incredibly proud of the story we told and the work we put into it. It all paid off.

Throughout the production process of *Intimate Apparel*, I was able to employ the craft I have learned over the past three years as well as learning new techniques and have new experiences.

Chapter 1: The Process

Before the First Rehearsal

Melissa encouraged us to read and study the play closely over winter break. Over the break I read and re-read and re-read the play. I also read a lot of books: background

⁴ catfish: a modern dating term describing a person whose online persona does not match the real person.

research on the time period, African-American life in 1905 and on being a prostitute. I compiled a list of dramaturgical questions (See Appendix B) and compiled the useful notes during my reading (See Appendix C). I focused much of my energy and research on two of Mayme's most dominant characteristics in text: being a prostitute and an accomplished piano player.

Being cast as a prostitute has been a repeat occurrence in my career. At UT, I played Pirate Jenny in *The Threepenny Opera* and portrayed the prostitute in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Jeffery Hatcher and in undergrad I played Lucy in *Jekyll & Hyde: The Musical*. In my experience, both in reading and performance, the prostitute's lifestyle is romanticized. Most often the secondary leading lady, with consistently darker features and less clothing than her angelic and socially accepted female counterpart, the prostitute is sexualized and more often than not saved from her life on the street by a handsome Prince who still eventually leaves her for the fairer, richer and certainly more virtuous "other." If I was going to continually be cast in these roles, it was about time I figured out how to find a different kind a depth to these characters. My goal was to make Mayme entirely human, completely relatable and not romanticized at all. I read biographies such as Chicken by David Henry Sterry, Some Girls: My Life in a Harem by Jilian Lauren and Ho's, Hookers, Call Girls and Rent Boys edited by David Henry Sterry to get firsthand knowledge about the life of a women in prostitution. This research showed me the grit, how raw and real the lifestyle really is. Women had to distance and remove themselves psychologically to get through the act. I found this to be eye-opening for Mayme; it reiterated how the risk she was taking by getting involved with George and how much she longed for true intimacy in a world where she usually suffered through a touch.

I had to bring a great deal of myself and my own flawed humanity to the character. Although I have never worked as a prostitute, I have certainly been in

situations where I have felt cheap or used. I was able to call upon those feelings when thinking about Mayme's sense of worth. I also relied on my own relationship with my father when connecting to Mayme. This gave me a new understanding of her need for love and intimacy and the risk involved in connecting herself to someone else, whether George or Esther. There were many moments in the show when I used my Meisner "as-if" training to reach the emotional place I needed in a real and genuine way.

Other preparation included by creating an image board (see Appendix D). These images helped me to get an idea of what the 1905 world looked like as well as providing inspiration for character.

Music/Piano

Ragtime music and piano playing is central to this show and to Mayme's character. I attacked this challenge on all fronts. One of the first things I did was to make a CD/playlist of Ragtime music that I constantly listened to. I wanted to live and breathe the syncopated rhythm that is Ragtime. With *Intimate Apparel* coming on the heels of our production of *Ragtime* at the Zach Theatre, I had been hearing some of these syncopated beats already. Building on that knowledge, I began spending more and more time sitting at my own keyboard. While I dabble in piano playing I am only a beginner. The last time I took lessons I was twelve years old. I reacquainted myself with how it feels to sit at a piano, taking into account some of the movement stuff Quetta had gone over.

Once the artistic team decided on using a non-playing piano and recording the songs, it became a waiting game of finding the songs to use, the sheet music and getting the songs recorded. Melissa and I set up a meeting with the piano player, Sam, to get some help and tips. Sam allowed us to record his hands playing so I could imitate what he was doing on my non-playing but very real piano keys. He took a great amount of time

and care to show me easy tricks to fool the audience. Once he showed me the trick of the left hand, I actually ear taught myself most of the right hand by listening to a recording of the songs over and over and messing around on my keyboard. In addition to filming all of the songs he already had, we improvised together and wrote the song in the show that Mayme and Esther sing onstage together, which we titled “Handyman.” It was fun to write music and riff with a professional and it gave me and Mykal special ownership of the song. Our duet was one of my favorite moments onstage: it was such a real moment of friendship, laughter and our history.

Movement

During *Intimate Apparel* rehearsals, we were lucky enough to have two movement work sessions with resident Acting/Movement professor, Quetta Carpenter. Quetta went over some of the major do’s and don’ts to keep the movement time period appropriate. As she told us the rules and manners of the movement during this period, Quetta also told me that because I am a prostitute, I could feel free to break the rules or follow them. Either way, it was a conscious choice. I tried to incorporate this and the other mannerisms of the time into my performance.

One thing Quetta and I talked about was my movement around the piano. I practiced sitting down and getting up off the piano bench excessively. The piano is Mayme’s prized possession, it is her art, it is what she lives for. Because of this, I wanted it to look like home. The ease with which I moved around it, played it and sat at it was vital. We talked about posture and how classical piano, which is how Mayme was trained, encourages an upright more stiff playing position. Ragtime is more relaxed and low. I incorporated this into my performance, sitting much more rigid when playing the

classical piece than when I am angry and scattered at the top of the show, playing from my gut and soul. I also thought about my movement in the way that I walked.

Working with Quetta, I discovered that the ladylike walk of the time was toe-heel to appear as if you are floating on the ground in a long skirt. Quetta agreed with me that it wasn't as important to maintain that walk all the time, particularly because I am not in a long skirt, but I did incorporate it to make a point. There is a moment in Act 1, Scene 4, where I mock Esther a little bit as I repeat her line, "Oh, courted by a gentlemen. Beg my pardon." On this line, I purposefully walk toe to heel with over emphasized arms and sit in the proper lady like way to make fun of her stuffiness and formality. This also drives home the difference between the two of us in class and status as well as our future prospects and opportunities.

Another thing she reminded us of (and kept us accountable on) was the meaning and the importance of touch in the early 1900's. Quetta explained to us that touch was a very intimate thing, particularly on the face. This was important to my character's interactions with Esther. I touch her three times on the face in the show and they are each at very intimate, tender moments between two friends. One such moment is in my final scene when Esther tells me that George has left her. The importance of the touch in that moment is to express the care and concern that Mayme feels for Esther and to build toward Mayme's genuine shock when discovering that her lover and her best friend's husband are one in the same.

Overall, the movement work with Quetta was incredibly beneficial. It helped form many beautiful moments in the play that allowed the audience to enter the 1905 world we were living in.

Dialect/Vocal Work

For this character, I chose to use a very slight southern accent. As a “colored girl from Georgia” I knew my character needed some roots in the south while being very grounded in the harsh realities of New York. I chose to just relax my speech a bit. I had one dialect session with Pamela, who enjoyed the choices I had made and gave me a few notes. She suggested that I flatten out some of my “r”s and make sure I don’t hit anything too hard.

Pamela also came to a run and gave some vocal notes. One note was to cheat out more when I am talking at the piano. Due to the fact that I have to talk over the piano recordings, it was important to discover how much I needed to project. I changed a few choices so that I could throw more of my lines over my shoulder. Pamela also reminded me to keep up my volume and diction during the quiet and intimate moments with Mykal, because many of those lines were getting lost. This is such an important thing to remember. It is so tempting to get quiet because we think it makes the scene that much more intimate. However, the audience still has to hear it. I found ways to punch up the volume while still keeping that personal feel. One example was on the line “I hope he is wonderful.” This is the last line I say in Act 1 and it says a lot about Mayme’s dashed dreams along with her love and concern for her friend. To lose this line is unacceptable, but it is a tender moment all the way upstage at the piano. At first, I was playing more of the sadness inside myself, how I had been let down in my life. When I got the volume note, I made a different choice. I decided to make it a true hope; to take those words at face value. It became a passionate plea to the universe, and as such, required more underneath it. I also cheated out a little and took a big breath before that line so I could stay on support. I didn’t get a volume note on that line again. And it was even more

rewarding because I didn't just say the line louder. I really felt as if I used the craft I have learned over the past three years to make that moment honest and audible.

My vocal work here at UT has greatly aided my performance in *Intimate Apparel*. I consistently use Barney's warm-ups before shows and used his methods in rehearsal when I reached a textual block or needed to find a new way into the text. The work that I have done with Barney and Pamela made the vocal work on this production one of the easiest aspects of my performance. The hardest adjustment, as usual, was the transition from the rehearsal space to the theatre, and having performed in there before, it just took me a few rehearsals and good warm-ups to get where I needed to be vocally.

In the Rehearsal Room

Working at this University in a production capacity for three years now, there are things you come to love, appreciate, to expect and things you learn to dread. Then there are the beautiful surprises that make the whole process that much more rewarding. What I learned from this production was how important reliability, consistency, attitude, work ethic, follow-through and rapport are, in addition to acting ability, to the success of the production and establishing positive working relationships. I also learned new ways to approach my process and my craft. I had challenges and encountered blocks but succeeded in overcoming them with the help of my director, cast-mates, dramaturgs and designers. I continued to learn that trust and communication make every facet of the actor's life better, easier and more successful.

Melissa Maxwell was one of the beautiful surprises about this show. Melissa, a guest artist brought in from New York, is a professional director, playwright, filmmaker,

actor and motivational speaker⁵. There are many things that I take from my work with Melissa, both technically and professionally.

I had a wonderful personal rapport with a director. I just got her. Melissa is an unapologetically strong woman; she commands attention and has a presence that is both graceful and intimidating. Intelligence and passion ooze out of her and I found it exhilarating and contagious. One of the reasons for our successful relationship was our communication. I understood her notes. I never felt like I had to translate. During *Cherry Orchard*, one of the valuable things Brant taught us was the idea that it is the actor's job to translate a director's notes into workable, tangible notes the actor can understand. What a gift it is when you don't have to translate! I understood her adjustments and more than that, I truly trusted her. Trust, I have discovered, is the absolute key to a truly positive and mutually artistic and rewarding actor-director relationship. Because I trusted Melissa, I never felt the need to argue a note or resist, I would just try it and see what happened. I knew that no matter what, she would listen to and trust my instincts as the actor inside of the thing.

I also trusted her because I was learning craft from her. This process was different from any I have had before, both because of the style of show and Melissa's way of working. We often called this show, a two-person show with more than two characters because every scene is a two-person scene with the main character, Esther. This afforded us the opportunity for intense and focused scene-work in a format that felt similar to our Acting⁶ classes. Having such one-on-one attention and work time was incredible. We got to actually work on craft every night in rehearsal and not just worry about blocking (as often happens in rehearsals especially with larger casts or scenes with more than one

⁵ You can see Melissa's TEDx Talks here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6cPBNBMSoY>

⁶ See Part 1: Chapter 1

person). Melissa was consistently more concerned with our actions, intentions, objectives, and subtext than with the blocking or getting the lines perfect, which I found to be incredibly freeing.

In our first rehearsal, Melissa spoke about the process and her expectations. She emphasized maintaining a sense of play, doing your work at home, bringing new ideas to rehearsal every day, and never leaving the room unhappy. At Melissa's suggestion, each day, I set a goal for myself: What is today's rehearsal going to be about? The build? The energy? The relationship? A certain line? This process was all about continual exploration and discovery and Melissa insisted we keep pushing and pressing. She encouraged us to let go of needing to get the lines right and focus instead on the why; the goals, motivations and obstacles of this character. What I loved about working with Melissa is that she really reiterated our training but was using vocabulary that really clicked with me.

As we learned in our Stanislavsky training, finding out what you want, your objective, and pursuing it with abandon, is imperative. I used both Lee Abraham and Fran Dorn's scene study techniques as I analyzed the text and kept record of blocking and choices by creating tables for my scenes (See Appendix E). Stanislavsky and Meisner training also focuses on the importance of the scene partner. John Langs would tell us that our test should always be in the other person; that we should be seeking a specific response and reaction from the other person to what we are saying. I poured everything into Mykal. I found this came to be super useful in my monologue at the end of the show. I was struggling with this monologue because it is a confession about sleeping with my best friend's husband but I desperately wanted her forgiveness and understanding. The stakes had to be so high and the loss so great so that I didn't become the villain but a victim of circumstance! I had to explain myself and try to show her why I fell under his

spell so I didn't lose my best and probably only true friend and in the end. My decision not to answer the door saves our friendship and restores the audiences faith in me.

Throughout the process, we continued to dig into the text. Working slowly and organically, we found our blocking by running the scenes and seeing what worked. When what we were physically doing was not matching the emotional life we needed, Melissa would stop us and remind us. In our acting classes, we talked a lot about activities and the physical action happening onstage and how to use it to inform the scene and character. After all, Aristotle defined character "as a sum total of an individuals actions," so it must then be assumed that our actions will match what we are saying as well as our emotional life (Bruder 34). Melissa's simple mantra of matching the physical to the emotional to the words resonated with me and allowed me to find certain moments. One example was when Mykal (Esther) and I were arguing about morality. I was feeling so awkward, not finding my blocking and feeling stifled. Melissa then asked me if Esther was squashing my excitement, would I really want to keep my precious, lovely jacket on? This allowed me to walk away from Esther and put the jacket away in a safe place, away from her judgmental eyes. The simple adjustment of my point of view as well as matching what I was doing physically to how I was feeling emotionally allowed the moment to come alive, and the conflict and difference between the two women to be highlighted.

We also talked a lot about subtext. I constantly used my training from Brant and John, becoming an investigator of the text. Melissa continually asked us, "Do you take what this character is saying at face value, or is something else going on?" One such discovery I made was on the line "I aint been to Prague, aint never gonna go to Prague" (Nottage 21). As we learned when working on *Cherry Orchard*, the subtext affects the shape of the scene. I really had to dig into the subtext of the moment to get emotionally

where I needed to be. I'm a whore with no money and no prospects and in that moment, Esther was breaking the rules of our game. Suddenly Esther was mixing reality with fantasy, and it is a harsh realization for Mayme to make, whose fantasy has no possibility of coming true. Despite this, Melissa didn't want the moment to become too angry and I struggled with finding my way through it. Ultimately, I had to let go of some of the anger and bitterness and replace it with desperation for hope. Digging into my toolbox once more, I thought about what I had learned about point of view. Sometimes, when you are given a note to change your emotion or attitude it can be hard to translate. You can't play hope or anger or desperation, it has to come from somewhere. In this moment, I adjusted my point of view from being angry and offended by her for asking the question to the notion that I know this is not the life I am meant to lead and attempt to get Esther to see things through my eyes.

This entire experience reminded me of the importance of professionalism when working with a director and my job as an actor. Melissa reiterated several times the importance of being able to take notes and apply them and how devastating it can be to an actor's career if they have to be given a note more than once. I kept a journal of notes and made sure to go over them after rehearsal and work them on my own if I needed to before the next rehearsal. It was also helpful to keep the journal so I could write down any questions I had or work through blocks (see Appendix F).

The cast included Mykal Monoe (Esther Mills), John Smiley (Mr. Marks), Geoffry Barnes (George), Nickclette Izuegbu (Mrs. Dickson) and Ann Pittman (Mrs. Van Buren). Other than Ann, the entire cast is part of my graduate acting cohort. We met Ann during *Ragtime* and encouraged her to audition. I could not have asked for a better cast. Everyone worked incredibly hard, kept the bar set high and committed 150%. In this process, however, I really only worked with Mykal, and very briefly with Geoff.

Working with Geoff in a situation that could have been very awkward was actually very easy and comfortable. The play calls for an intimate moment between the two of us where he caresses my breasts. Because Geoff is such a close friend and because I trust him so much, the physical contact was no problem at all. We didn't really need to break the ice or have a conversation. I am interested to see how this will play out in my future. I have never had to do an intimate scene with a stranger and I wonder how I would handle it. From my limited experience and observation, the most important things when it comes to crossing physical boundaries on-stage seem to be trust and communication which I am lucky to say Geoff and I had.

What can I say about working with Mykal? I am in awe of her work on this production. She inspired me and pushed me. She was generous, patient, kind, committed and willing to "go there." She was everything you could want in a scene partner. Going into this process, I was actually a bit nervous to work with her. Our styles have not always melded and have butt heads in the past; I thought we might kill each other in our first year. None of that seeped in. We both jumped on the train and went for the wild ride. Things I have always admired about Mykal are her risk taking, her lack of inhibitions, her willingness to push the boundaries and her ability to play. I tried to take this into every rehearsal. I wanted us to be successful and I didn't want any of my resistance or tendency to be inflexible to bleed into our work. She inspired me to be bolder; I knew I could try things with her and she would go with them. I was a better actor in our scenes because of her and I am coming out of this program a better actor because of my work with her and observation of her. I am truly grateful for this experience with her and owe so much of my success in this production to her.

Run of the Show

By the time opening arrived we were ready. We had a wonderful audience. The energy of opening night felt incredible. Technically, everything went well other than me running into the piano bench and knocking it over when entering in a blackout. We solved this problem by me cueing myself in rather than waiting for a call as well as adding glow tape to the edge of the bench. This way, I could enter and maneuver around the bench without incident. Another huge technical error occurred the next weekend when the sound guy played a wrong cue. During my most emotionally charged monologue at the end of the play, a happy rag began playing. It completely threw me and I struggled to get through the monologue. But I took a breath, tried to collect my thoughts and focus the best I could and fought through it. It was a frustrating moment because I had no control over it and it completely took me out of the moment.

This entire show was a good lesson in blocking out distractions and learning how to focus and stay in the scenes against all odds. The theatre space was incredibly intimate. The audience was literally only a foot away so any noise or shift or reaction can be felt. We had one night that several cell phones went off and every night the emotional reactions from the audience were very intense. Once we had an audience in the room, it was interesting to see how audibly they laughed and gasped and cried. I could physically feel the energy in the room shift once I let George in my bedroom and had to raise the stakes and my investment in the next to scenes to ultimately win them back and prove my innocence.

The most frustrating part of the run was merely how short it was. Eight shows is nothing and I really felt like I was barely scratching the surface and still making discoveries on closing night. One of my favorite acting master teachers, Uta Hagen, says it well, "I have found something brand new internally at the closing performance which I

deeply regretted being unable to put to use the next night...[a long run] can help you to deepen, and to *be* the character for those few hours every night” (Hagen).

Chapter 2: Performance Evaluation

Personal Evaluation

Beginning this process I was beyond scared. I was incredibly nervous about being cast in an African-American role. I talked to my advisor about it and she told me to let it go. I voiced my concerns to Melissa, and she told me to let it go. So I let it go. I gave myself completely over to the process. I learned so many valuable things. One, is how good it feels to click with a director. Another thing I learned for myself is that all directors are different, and the good actor, the working actor, gives themselves over to the directors process. I learned I can do what I want at home, in my own rehearsals, but I found that giving myself over to the director in the rehearsal room very rewarding. Even when I questioned what she was saying, or her ideas, I just went with it. I tried first and asked questions later. It was so freeing! I went in directions I never would have gone and she pushed me farther than I could have pushed myself. I also realize this is a gift, and not all directors are like this, which is why you go to graduate school and create a process and a toolbox for yourself.

I am so grateful for the experience of working on this show. Such intense scene work was a gift. I am such a performer, and I finally couldn't use that. I had to get real, and gritty and I really had to listen and invest in Mykal. None of my tricks worked and all of my habits stuck out like green thumbs. I finally felt successful in creating a real character. The emotional was matching the physical and as John Lang's would have said, Mayme was a 3-Dimensional character. This was probably the most fun, and the most

confident I have ever felt on a show and I believe it was because of the craft I have built at this school. Suddenly I had the craft and tools to problem solve in and out of rehearsal.

Outside Feedback

Overall, the response to this production was overwhelmingly positive. The first ever main-stage African-American production seemed to strike people to their souls. The audience response during shows was amazing. I will never forget the moment I brought out the jacket in our final dress. The gasps from the audience were exhilarating and to know how invested they had become in the story reminded me of why I do theatre. Theatre is meant to hit you in the face, it is meant to be intimate and captivating in a live, living and breathing way and you could literally feel this happening to the audience.

Critically, we were reviewed by the Austin Chronicle, Broadway World and the UT newspaper (see Appendix G). They were all incredibly positive. Broadway world called the ensemble “outstanding” and my performance as Mayme, “fantastic” (Davis). Elizabeth Cobbe of The Chronicle calls the characters, “well-meaning and fascinating” while the Daily Texan notes that the “entire cast never misses a beat and is, most importantly, utterly convincing” (Williams).

Faculty, student and my director’s response was also entirely positive. I received so many lovely notes and words of praise and encouragement (see Appendix H). All of my faculty made a point to come up to me and even Brant Pope stopped me in the halls and told me he could really see me trying to change my scene partner and how invested I was in the moment. I was proud that I had so visibly incorporated his teachings and my training as a whole into my performance. *Intimate Apparel* felt exactly like what it was: a culmination of my experience and training here at UT and a perfect bridge to my professional career.

COMPLETING A JOURNEY

The past three years have been an incredible journey rooted in self-discovery and the building of my craft. All of my experiences here have allowed me to develop a confidence in myself as an artist that I did not have when I came to Texas three years ago. In my classes I learned a plethora of tools, tricks and techniques in addition to now being able to tackle all kinds of text both comedic and dramatic, from contemporary to Shakespeare to Chekov. In production, I was able to directly apply the craft I was learning in the classroom as well as being able to work with many different directors, each with their own unique style and gifts of knowledge to impart. The faculty too, has guided me and encouraged me to face my weaknesses and continually strive to be a better actor and person by setting the bar of expectations high and never accepting less than my best artistry. And then there's some of the best stuff, the human stuff, which I have learned from my small cohort with whom I have traveled this road for the past three years.

Much of what I have learned about life, myself and my artistry I have learned from my peers, who during this journey became my support and my drive. They were and are brilliant examples of diverse, beautiful artists who amaze me every day with their unique gifts. From my peers I have learned how to love more gently, how to relax, how to open up, how to be brave, how to believe in myself, how to advocate for myself, how to overcome loss, fear and address our deepest and darkest demons.

The MFA Acting Program at the University of Texas was a three year journey that cultivated me as an actor, an artist, a teacher and a human. But as they say, an artist's training is never done. Even Meisner said it takes twenty years of training to be a good actor (Meisner). It is with joy, eagerness and pride that I leave this institution to begin my

career and continue my development in the 'real world.' I leave here knowing that whatever turns, surprises and opportunities that may fall into my path, I am armed with craft and an army of UT support behind me. On the eighteenth of May when I am handed a piece of paper to prove that I have successfully completed the program, the old adage 'It's all about the journey, not the destination' will have never rung more true because along the way I have found myself, freedom and a deeper love and passion for what I do than I ever could have dreamed of.

Appendix A: Shakespeare Notes

Notes on Shakespeare (aka Franisms)

- Up & Out! → a line must build upon itself, build to the end of the line
- ALL the *Truth*, ALL the *Beauty*, ALL the time!
- Truth=gut reactions
- Quick rate of thinking and speaking
- Ask honest questions!
- Take possession and ownership of the language
- Build Images → “if you SEE it, then I’ll see it”
 - Must find *whole* image and the build
 - Creating pictures through the phrases
- Allow things to happen
- Building to the extraordinary/case-building/what’s worse
- Need to RECEIVE and be affected by what the other is saying
- When rehearsing, FINISH a beat before moving on
- How can you raise the stakes?
 - FIRST MOMENT: my need is very strong in the first moment until I hit the first obstacle
 - Must know how much is at stake from this first moment
- Entering: coming in with such *great purpose* from *someplace specific* that the audience needs to know what’s about to happen.
 - Moment before must be strong
 - Must find beat before so I find/know the impact of the first word
- Need Information: *respond* to what your given → a moment to moment understanding of what is happening to these people
 - Take what is right there (given by the other actor) and respond with the words I have (this requires fluidity)
- Breathe in the character and exhale response.
 - Breathe in partners line=*active listening*
- Take in the room and situation
- I need to VISCERALLY understand what the words mean
- The stronger the intention the more powerful the discovery
- Get it into my body *physically*
- I am responsible for getting my partner to a place to say their next line
 - I am responsible for their transitions
 - Response should be organic and immediate

- Know my partners final punctuation
- Do not float on a line→have a strong action and purpose
- Go slowly at first, beat by beat
- Put *everything* into the other
- Questions to ask:
 - What do I want?
 - What is the impetus that begins this?
 - What is outside of the space? Where am I coming from? Who did I leave?
→exact circumstances
 - How do I feel about the person I am talking to?
- Assume you are talking to a hostile audience
- Don't come out and talk...experience
- Find the impetus for next beat from the bounce of the one before
- I must respond to something specific (even first words!)
- Stay true to the moment→don't get caught up in the mannerisms
- I must LOVE my monologue→I must be *invested*
 - Keep it close to my heart and soul
- Language informs character: Shakespeare gives you reasons and evidence as to why your character acts and reacts the way she does
 - Example: Adriana's length of sentences and overdescription
- Make everything *provocative*→space, conditions, relationship etc
- Always stop for a second when you enter→take in surroundings!
- DISCOVERY: of place/space, person, words (they are brand new, new event, experiencing in the HERE & NOW)
 - Discovery happens on *every* line of Shakespeare
- I want to put my partner off balance, to provoke them
 - Don't make it easy, keep it alive
- Shakespeare is the "est" is people's lives→happiest, angriest, most in love etc; life and death all the time
 - Comedy: they *think* its life and death
 - Tragedy: it *is* life and death
- Don't ever worry about what "they" (auditioners) want. Go in and demonstrate that you ARE what they want.
- I don't have to be predictable
- Each new thought is predicated and comes out of the thought before
- Energize through to the end of the line; don't drop out or soften

- Individual words are serving greater whole
- I have to make the audience understand what I am talking about using these words
- I must genuinely know what I am saying and what it looks like
- Think up! (with eyes versus downcast eyes)
- With Shakespeare, you say what you mean and mean what you say→if I am lying, there will be a scene to explain it, so play it as truth; take Shakespeare *literally*
- Choice of words is specific
- There is power in using a *name*
- If the character is using a play on words or playing off the others words...they know
 - Pick up your partners words→wit
- As the character, I cannot know where the scene is going to go
- Sometimes characters talk across each other
- Don't pretend characters understand what each other is talking about if they don't. Use it to my advantage
- Clarity →I must make my partner understand what I want them to see
 - Freedom to speak in phrases rather than words→this aids clarity and allows my partner to "see" what I am saying
- Words should be spoken as if for the first time
- I want to create an image, not just say pretty words well
- Operatives: lifted up, new information, needs different inflection/lengthen/different volume/tone→need vocal range, color the words
- Parentheticals: lie above or below the line, I must move it or it will lose its value.
- Monosyllabic lines: when it is very profound, Shakespeare uses single syllable words. They usually fall off metet
- Oh/ Ah etc =emotional, verbal sound; release
- The important part of Shakespeares lines come at the end
- Everybody has a function (even the lady in waiting)
 - Suggestions: with a small part, always be having an affair with the lead
- Most directors hate crowd scenes→cannot steal focus but must stay ALIVE
- To become a principal→presence and sense of danger
 - Demanding attention by what you bring into the space
 - A 3-Dimensional person
- Shakespeare is interested in FIRST meetings (literally and figuratively)
- I must be compelled to stay in the room as the character

- Emotion is a by-product to something that occurred
 - Tears/crying gets old fast, the audience is ready to move on
- Always progressing and always moving forward!
- Empty Feet: Shakespeare is giving you time, something has just been said or done this is so profound/shocking etc it has rendered everyone mute. Earth shattering!
- Acting=an extension of what you do all the time (just more conscious)
- Never do two things at once→multiple things in rapid succession
- *Transitions* are interesting
- Invisible Partner: only exist to make me look good, they can do whatever I need them to, to get reaction I want.

Exercises:

1. Shock noise at top of every line
2. Inhale at top of line
3. What's worse with list
4. Articulation Exercises
 - a. The tip of the tongue, the lips and the teeth
 - b. Mah-Maw-Moo-Maw-Mah-May-Mee-May (change one letter or put a different letter on end)

Appendix B: Dramaturgical Questions

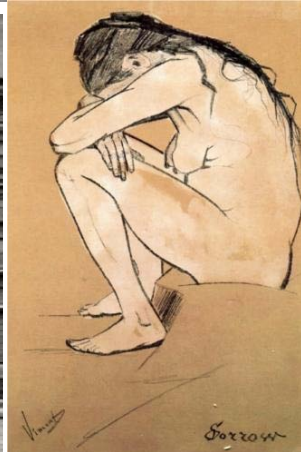
Hi Eleanor!

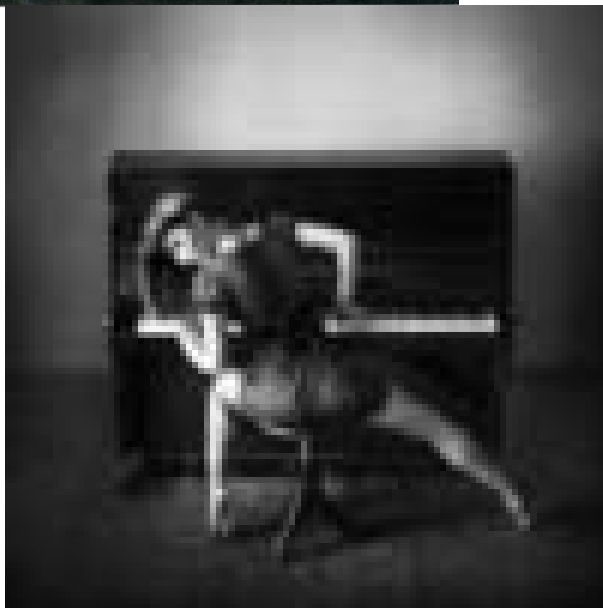
I wanted to touch base with you dramaturgically for Intimate Apparel! Below is a running list of questions I have. Obviously I will continue to do my own research to answer them (I know it's a LOT), but anyway you may be able to help would be great. Or if you can point me in the direction of where I may be able to find some answers that would be great too!

- Is the song in Scene 6 (pg 30-31) a real song from time? If so, what one, who wrote it, is sheet music available?
- Was it common for prostitutes to smoke cigarettes or tobacco of any kind?
- What kind of alcohol was most common to drink? Did they have metal flasks?
- Curious about drug use amongst prostitutes: type, commonality, how often, when?
- With corsets:
 - Did they wear corsets during sex?
 - When were they worn and when were they taken off? (ie do they sleep in them, wear just in public?)
- With prostitution:
 - What were the hours like? Did they set their own?
 - Brothel vs Apartment → common living situations
 - Who were clients? Status/class/race
 - Did clients always come to them?
 - How much did they make? One session? In a day? In a year?
 - What was the mortality rate?
 - What diseases were common?
 - Abuse, kinky stuff, rough, oral, anal...did they have ANY control over this or who their clients were?
 - How did they find clients? Did they walk the streets? Work bars?
- With daily life:
 - What would her diet have been like? Clean drinking water? Go hungry? Good food, shitty food etc.
 - How often did they bathe (Im assuming no showers)? In actual tub? With washcloth?
 - What did they use to cover up smell?
 - Were there toilets? How use bathroom? (particularly after sex)
 - What did prostitutes do when they were on their period? And what did they use?

Thanks again SO much!!

Appendix C: Image Board





Appendix D: Research Notes

RESEARCH NOTES

- “Each of the nine young women who lived in the house knew that Rosina always locked the door around midnight and knew further that the lock required a key both inside and out. Some customers came and went during the evening hours, while other stayed the night. In the event that a late-night customer had to leave before morning, the house rule ensured that each departing man would be escorted to the door; which minimized problems of mischief or theft.” (Cohen 6).
 - This could be why he doesn’t stay past midnight and it’s not a BAD thing!!
- “Brothel keepers in New York City found it wise to be security conscious” (Cohen 6).
 - Getting roughed around could be common → hence top of Sc 4
- They had regulars, 1x/week customers
 - So George coming by “three times a week like the ice man” is a BIG deal (Nottage 47).
- Prostitutes went by aliases; often an altered version of their names.
 - IS her name actually Mayme?
- “A prostitute could not lay claim to public sympathy” (Cohen 61).
- Moved to NYC at 19, already an experienced prostitute (Cohen 61-62).
 - Backstory: since Mayme had not “been to since I was seventeen” (Nottage 30).
- On reading Women on the Streets: interesting to read case studies on individuals. Most began prostitution in late teens and early twenties. They came from many different backgrounds, mostly lower class.
- In 1970’s there was a series of yellow fever outbreaks, one in 1978 being the worst which reduced the population by 75% (Wikipedia).
 - For Mayme to survive as a baby (3 years old) she must have had better than normal living conditions.
 - Also probable that she lost family. Because we know her father was alive while she trained in the piano...perhaps she lost her mother that we don’t hear about (backstory!!)
- Could have discovered her love for music as child on Beale Street; on the Mississippi river lots of culture and arts, many traveling musicians (Wikipedia).

- “There was a darker side to this sense of optimism in American in 1900. America was becoming a society of immigrants, people who were different from the previous immigrants. Many of them were from southern Europe. That meant they were darker. Then of course there was the African American population. So the individuals who were responsible for the labor force were part of this horde of inferior peoples in American society. So when we think about the optimism, we’re not necessarily including these people who are part of the other half. For then it’s not so much a period of optimism. Although the people who are not included in this sense of optimism, they themselves had a sense of aspiration and a sense of hope” (Washington).
 - Good to think about in scene where Mayme and Esther daydream.
- “...the lure of jobs drew southern black women to northern cities...” (Woloch).
 - Could this be why she came in the first place. Seeking job as singer/piano player or even a domestic?
- Monetary Values: \$1 in 1905=\$26-\$55 in 2013
 - How much she got for each client. “...for a dollar they think they own you” (Nottage).
 - Does she get it all? Probably has to pay the saloon a %
- The Tenderloin: “...the premier sex-work district in New York City in the early 1900s...it is most likely that the character of Mayme lives and works in the edge of the Tenderloin district between W 36th and to 41st Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, where the majority of black prostitution was relegated” (Griffin).
- “...the city of New York required that women of the night register with local law enforcement...most prostitutes never bothered registering...as a result, the US witnessed a spike in venereal diseases—the most common being syphilis. Young prostitutes like Mayme risked exploitation, disease, and abuse at the hands of strange men. A street-smart prostitute knew she must have some muscle behind her” (Wilson).
 - A reason for giving in to George and taking the risk? Especially after just being treated rough by a client as we see at the top of Act One, Scene Four.
 - Does she have a disease? Life expectancy?

Appendix E: Reviews

BWW Reviews: UT-Austin's INTIMATE APPAREL is an Expertly Stitched Drama

[Back to the Article](#)

by Jeff Davis



Truth be told, I'm a bit unsure how to start this review. When I see something as astonishing and extraordinary as *Intimate Apparel*, I try to come up with something clever, witty, or poetic to kick off my critique, but I am so wonderfully flustered by this beautifully acted and well-crafted production that all I can think off to kick off this review is "Wow."

Intimate Apparel, written in 2003 by [Lynn Nottage](#), is a quiet and subdued turn of the century drama. Our heroine, Esther, is a thirty-five year old African-American spinster who has moved from North Carolina to New York City to pursue a better life. When she begins receiving letters from George, a Barbados-born laborer at the Panama canal, Esther is forced to address her romantic feelings towards [Mr. Marks](#), the Jewish man who sells her fabrics and her ideas for her future. While the play has plenty of

themes and motifs-love, betrayal, race, class, femininity-Nottage balances all of them. While the overall idea about the fleeting nature of intimacy is apparent in every scene, Nottage doesn't hammer the message home. Her ideas are organic and flow easily through the story and characters, making the play absolutely riveting.

Mykal Monroe gives a remarkable performance as Esther. She's meek, plain, dowdy, and uptight, almost like Laura in *A Glass Menagerie*, but underneath her week visage is a courageous and steadfast woman. Monroe's performance is spellbinding. She captures your attention in every moment, and she is a pleasure and a treat to watch.



Monroe is supported by an equally outstanding five person ensemble. As Mrs. Dickson, the matron of Esther's boarding house, Nickclette Izuegbu is a stern, strong, independent woman whose concern for Esther is almost like that of a mother to a child. As Mrs. Van Buren, the Southern belle socialite who is one of Esther's most faithful clients, Amy Pittman balances her character's light, airy qualities and inner sadness with ease. John Smiley is wonderful as [Mr. Marks](#), the Jewish fabric seller, and he excels at bringing the energetic, somewhat lovelorn man to life. Amanda Morish is fantastic as Mayme, Esther's piano-playing prostitute friend, and Geoffrey Barnes is able to make George's earnestness in Act I and anger in Act II completely believable.

Director [Melissa Maxwell](#) does a wonderful job at focusing on the personal feel of the play. Almost all of the scenes are two-person moments between Esther and one of her counterparts, and the relationships created between Esther and those around her are nuanced and exceedingly delicate. Even Jocelyn Pettway's set, which initially feels a bit cluttered and claustrophobic, adds to the motif of personal relationships. Each of the supporting characters and their respective rooms are designated a corner of the stage. Each setting bleeds into the next, as if each character and their impact on Ester are at odds with each other. Ryan Andrus's lighting adds a beautiful dusty quality to the play, and Stephanie Busing's use of projections is quite effective and is integrated seamlessly into the piece. But of the design work, you'll probably remember Chin-Hua Yeh's costumes the most. As should be expected from a play about a seamstress, the costumes demand attention. They are lush and beautiful, and every piece is exquisitely tailored from meticulously chosen fabrics.

In a way, *Intimate Apparel* feels much like the clothes that Esther makes. It is beautiful and carefully tailored with just the right amount of accoutrement and decoration, and the play fits the cast and crew like a glove.

Photo: Nickclette Izuegbu (L) and Mykal Monroe (R) in INTIMATE APPAREL. Photo by Josh Rasmussen.

INTIMATE APPAREL, produced by UT-Austin's Department of Theatre and Dance, plays the Oscar G. Brockett Theatre at 200 E 23rd St, Austin 78712 now thru Saturday, March 9th. Performances are Thursday - Saturday at 8pm. Tickets are \$15-25. For tickets and information, please visit <http://texasperformingarts.org/season/intimate-apparel-theatre-austin>

INTIMATE APPAREL

The loneliness of an African-American seamstress in 1905 is staged with powerful honesty by UT

Reviewed by [Elizabeth Cobbe](#), [Fri., March 8, 2013](#)



Out of touch: Nickclette Izuegbu and Mykal Monroe in *Intimate Apparel*
Photo courtesy of Josh Rasmussen/UT Austin

INTIMATE APPAREL

Oscar Brockett Theatre, 300 E. 23rd, 471-5793

www.jointhedrama.org

Through March 9

Running time: 2 hr., 30 min.

In Lynn Nottage's play *Intimate Apparel* at the University of Texas Department of Theatre & Dance, the protagonist Esther (Mykal Monroe) sews undergarments for other women in New York in 1905. She touches their flesh with her laces and silks, but she remains alienated from their lives – by race, by class, and by simple loneliness.

One day, a letter arrives. A simple worker on the Panama Canal has heard of her. George Armstrong (Geoffrey Barnes) is lonely and would like to begin a correspondence. Esther agrees – only, she can't read or write. Her clients and friends help her out by transcribing and reading aloud letters to and from her suitor, which she carries with her every day. To Esther, the letters are possibilities that she – a never-married, 35-year-old African-American seamstress – might someday be loved by a good man.

Intimate Apparel operates on a line of tension between touch and separation. Bound by the restrictions of her time and place, Esther longs for genuine touch but is not allowed or can't accept it. Despite the upsetting ways in which the story eventually turns, there are well-meaning and fascinating characters in this play who equally desire a genuine intimacy. Esther's wealthy customer Mrs. Van Buren (Ann Pittman) is trapped in a loveless marriage. Her landlady Mrs. Dickson (Nickclette Izuegbu) is the widow of an

opium addict, and her friend Mayme (Amanda Morish) is trapped in a life of prostitution. Esther's supplier, Mr. Marks (an especially engaging John Smiley), is the only person who shares Esther's deep love and knowledge of fine fabrics but, as an Orthodox Jew in his time, he cannot even allow his skin to touch hers. Esther is left to dream of a distant suitor, someone whose letters arrive from far away, and to wish that other impossible distances might be closed.

The set, designed by Jocelyn Pettway, reinforces the separations in the story. Each location is isolated from the others. Each character can only operate in certain places. Thanks to her trade, Esther alone can travel through all of these spheres. Wisely, the set includes all locations on the stage at once, preventing the kind of transitions that would interrupt the story.

As Esther navigates these places, we see her change from one sort of person to another. Under Melissa Maxwell's direction, the movement into a new identity is powerful. Monroe's performance as Esther makes her changes gradual and subtle, but they are also unmistakable by the end of the story. The honesty with which her character's story is presented is the gift to the audience for accompanying her through a lonely and sad journey.

UT'S 'INTIMATE APPAREL' WILL LEAVE YOU REELING



Nickclette Izuegbu and Mykal Monroe perform Lynn Nottage's play "Intimate Apparel."

Published on March 3, 2013 at 10:45 pm Last update on March 4, 2013 at 3:57 pm

By [Elizabeth Williams](#)

[Lynn Nottage](#)'s play "Intimate Apparel" is the 1905 equivalent of MTV's "Catfish".

The UT theatre department's production of "Intimate Apparel" focuses on the life of Esther Mills, an African American seamstress working in Manhattan. Esther has recently turned 35 and realizes that something is missing from her life as a ladies' lingerie seamstress. She longs for love and marriage, and dreams of opening a salon to pamper African American women.

However, Esther's luck seemingly changes as she begins a letter correspondence with George Armstrong, a laborer working on the Panama Canal. George eventually comes to New York to marry Esther and, little by little, the couple realizes they are not who their letters presented them to be.

"Intimate Apparel" opens with Esther at her sewing machine, creating unmentionables for yet another female acquaintance that has beat her to the alter.

"In terms of character, Esther is very different from me," said [Mykal Monroe](#), who is playing the lead role of Esther. "I've had to find a darker, more depressed avenue of my psyche, which at times is actually not that fun but is very necessary to accurately portray this woman."

Monroe's portrayal of Esther, while gravely serious at times, is anything but depressing. Esther may be mild-mannered and level-headed, but her secret ambitions really bring her to life.

Attachment to Esther deepens throughout the play, felt especially in the audible gasps of the crowd as Esther's world begins to unravel.

The romantic tension between Esther and Mr. Marks, a Romanian Jewish immigrant who shares her love for fabric is equally stinging. In an age where we are taught that love will overcome all, the audience is forced to swallow the pill and accept that a marriage between these two people in 1905 is impossible.

"I love comedy, and this is not a comedy," Monroe said. "With comedy, there is an interaction that I have with the audience that definitely feeds me in a way ... It's going to be much more silent than I'm used to in a live show. I feed off the laughs."

Even with Monroe's warning to the serious nature of the play, the tension is broken with plenty of laughs. The entire cast never misses a beat and is, most importantly, utterly convincing.

Making a story set in 1905 relevant to an audience in 2013 wasn't as difficult as it sounds according to the play's director, Melissa Maxwell.

"It's because the play is set in a time when letter writing was the main form of communication," Maxwell said. "What's so funny is that email has brought that form of communication back. People will text rather than pick up the phone and call each other. People will often meet online and spend a little time getting to know each other through written words rather than face to face, or via the phone."

While "Intimate Apparel" feels very 1905 with background ragtime music and corseted costuming, the use of video and strobe lighting warp the sense of reality created by the play. These surreal effects could have been a distraction but blend into the story and offer a break from the overwhelming despair of Esther's story.

The intimate set design, with the audience seated on three sides of the stage, mere feet away from the actors at times, creates a voyeuristic fly on the wall feeling that heightens the audience's engagement.

With such professional execution from the entire cast and the engrossing atmosphere created by the production team, UT's "Intimate Apparel" will leave the audience reeling.

Published on March 4, 2013 as "Play achieves 20th century feel".

Appendix F: Emails

FROM: LUCIEN DOUGLAS, acting head

Hi Amanda,

Excellent work in INTIMATE APPAREL!!
Brava!

Am I correct . . . You will not be able to stay in LA or in NYC after the showcase to take possible interview requests? Winters Tale interferes?

Lucien

Sent from my iPad

Lucien Douglas, PhD
Head of Acting Program
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Texas at Austin
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Austin, TX 78712

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l.douglas@austin.utexas.edu

FROM: LEE ABRAHAM, Acting Faculty
Nickclette, Mycal, & Amanda,

I saw Geoff & John in the building and offered my congratulations on their work in “Intimate Apparel,” which I saw on Sunday. But it looks like I might not run into you three before Spring Break, so please accept my congratulations on your superb work in the play. You all make strong impressions, and it’s clear to me your dedication to the training has paid off handsomely in the growth of your talent. Brava, women!

Best wishes,

LEE E. ABRAHAM
Associate Professor
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Texas at Austin

1 University Station #D3900
Austin, TX 78712-1168
Telephone (512) 232-5312

FROM: Natasha Lindsey, PhD student

Hi, Ya'll!

I saw *Intimate Apparel* on Thursday night and I wanted to take a second to write you a love letter of my own.

I have never fallen so in love with a cast, and a play, so swiftly and completely! I immediately went home and bought tickets to Friday night's performance. The beauty that you all created on that stage was breath-taking. The subtlety with which you made these characters come to life, gave them breath, and embodied their complexities was absolutely stunning. Your performances made me laugh and moved me to tears. And even on the second night I couldn't help but gasp! (I wish I could have come back for a third performance.)

While it seems like so little after what you offered... Thank you! Thank you for two wonderful and memorable nights at the theatre!!

Sincerely,
Natashia

P.S. Could someone please forward this to Ms. Pittman? I couldn't find her email.

--

Natashia Lindsey, M.A.
Ph.D Student
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Texas at Austin

FROM: NEDA ABDUL-RASSACK, TD 303 Student

Hi Amanda,

Just wanted to say that I saw your play tonight and thought it was fantastic! Really enjoyed your performance especially :)

Best,
Neda

FROM: LIZ KIMBALL, MFA Cohort

it was such a joy to watch all of your work last night.

i appreciated so many things about each of your performances, the way you were using craft and the way you were simultaneously letting it go as you responded to your partner in the moment, the way you all were listening, the way you all were sustaining emotional truths. I was moved by your deep commitment to the emotional lives of all of these fascinating people.

lovely lovely lovely. and heartbreaking.

the other thing i was thinking is, for the first time before tech, you guys are in GREAT shape to be opening next week.

i am so sad not to see the finished product - but, like mykal said, we can look at production photos and just use our imaginations.

i hope you all are extremely proud of the work you're doing!

break legs next week!

xoxo

Liz Kimball

Assistant Instructor, Fundamentals of Acting

MFA Acting

The University of Texas at Austin

www.lizkimball.com

FROM: SAM LIPMAN, Pianist

Hey it's Sam the pianist.

I saw the show on Thursday night.

Just wanted to say you did a fantastic

job of playing the piano, even better than most musicians as you could carry conversation at the same time.

Awesome.

I can't believe that you were trying to steal Esther's husband!

Anyway hope to catch you in the next play.

Sam the pianist

FROM: MELISSA MAXWELL, director

Melissa Maxwell Mar 10 (9 days ago)

to me

You, my dear, are very welcome. And the feeling is mutual. You were a joy to work with!!!!

Much love,

Melissa

Melissa Maxwell

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Vita

Amanda Christine Morish, stage name Amanda Salazar, was born and raised in Chico, California and graduated from Pleasant Valley High School. She moved to Sacramento and received her BA in both Theatre and Psychology with a minor in Musical Theatre from California State University, Sacramento. Amanda is passionate about her craft and bringing the arts to underserved communities and underprivileged children and continuing to break the glass ceiling for women and Latinos in theatre. You can find more information about Amanda and her artistic endeavors on her website, www.amandasalazar.net.

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This thesis was typed by Amanda Christine Morish